

## War on the Edge of Europe: the Chechen conflict in a new light?

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# War on the Edge of Europe

**The Chechen conflict in a new light?**

*Uwe Halbach*

The Moscow hostage drama has brought the war in Chechnya back into public discussion. Spectacular kidnappings with large numbers of casualties were a feature of the escalation of violence in the North Caucasus in the past. But never did the outpouring of violence from the war in Chechnya strike Russia and the rest of the world as directly as it did this time. The Russian Government's official position on the act of terrorism in Moscow, and its alleged link with international terrorism, is an occasion to re-examine some aspects of the long war in the North Caucasus region.

Already President Putin's first statement on the terrorist attack emphasised its international dimension: the alleged organisation of the attack from abroad. According to Putin, an international terrorist group planned and carried out the attack in Moscow, which is part of a series of attacks on targets in Indonesia and the Philippines. On 24th October, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called upon all nations from whose territories the Chechen terrorists receive support to take measures to put an immediate end to this situation.

## Notes on the conflict's external dimension

As expected, the Kremlin's comments regarding the hostage drama picked up on a pattern of interpretation that has become its strategy of legitimisation for the second Chechen war. According to this, Russia is

fighting Islamic fundamentalist aggressors in the North Caucasus region. This explanation, which obscures the origins and the substance of the Russian-Chechen war, has become standard since the end of the first Chechen war, which ended in a humiliation for Russia. Since then, Russian commentaries have linked the growth of Islamic fundamentalist («Wahhabi») movements in the North Caucasus with the spectre of foreign infiltration.

This interference theory in regard to international Islamist terror networks is not entirely plucked from the air. From the Islamic parts of South East Asia to the Balkans, there is hardly a regional conflict in which this element is not caught up. The involvement of Islamic brigades under the command of Emir Khattab in both Chechen wars is undeniable. The Jordanian national, who was killed during a special operation of the FSB in April 2002, became a symbol

for Moscow's theory that the «war against Russia in Chechnya» should be understood as an aspect of international terrorism and Islamic extremism.

In both wars, foreign Mujahedin fought side-by-side with Chechen fighters, just as Chechens turned up amongst the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, the suggestion of links between the Jihad nerve centres in Afghanistan and representatives of the «Chechen revolution», such as Shamil Bassayev and Zenlimkhan Yanderbayev, who had been spotted in Kabul, hardly justifies claims of a substantial and specific role for Chechnya in international Islamic fundamentalist networks. Russian allegations about the «internationalisation of the rebel camp» in Chechnya vary sharply, and often seem markedly exaggerated. The opposite side, in the shape of Aslan Maschadov, recently admitted that 200 foreign fighters are currently situated in Chechnya. As far as Chechen complicity with the Taliban and Al Qaeda is concerned, only minor numbers of Chechens were amongst the international Islamic brigades arrested in Afghanistan by US units and the Northern Alliance.

When the secession conflict between Russia and Chechnya broke out – which is only the most recent chapter in a history full of conflicts and violence – Islamic fundamentalism only played a marginal role. At the beginning of the independence movement, it occupied a position at the edges of the ideological spectrum of the «Chechen revolution». This only became more Islamised after the clashes with the Russian army in the first Chechen war (December 1994 to September 1996). The then leader, Dzhokhar Dudayev, once said in retrospect that Russia had catapulted Chechnya into Islam. Islamic fundamentalist currents increased in the period between the wars (1996–1999), when the «Chechen Republic of Ichkeria», vacated by the Russian troops, slipped into chaos, and the terms «Islamic State», «Sharia» and «Jihad» were the war cries in the power-struggle between divergent political actors within

Chechnya. The second Chechen war turned the entire North Caucasus region into an even more attractive point of attack for Islamic fundamentalists than it was before, and the regional focus of a «Wahhabi-hysteria» in the Russian media.

### **A Problem of Differentiation:**

**«Moderates», «Radicals»,  
«Separatists», «Terrorists»**

«The mass-kidnapping in Moscow has to be a moment of truth for those who divide the terrorists in Chechnya into «good» and «evil»,» was the message of the declaration of the Russian Foreign Ministry above.

Since the beginning of the second war, and with added emphasis since September 11th, Russia has criticised the classification of her military opponents in the North Caucasus abroad into «moderate» and «extremist» forces, instead of generally qualifying them as «terrorists». The West is sticking to this distinction in its negotiation recommendations with Moscow. A «moderate camp» around Aslan Maschadov, who is remembered as the pragmatic chief negotiator in the ending of the first Chechen war, and voted by the people as the President of the «Chechen Republic of Ichkeria», is suggesting itself as a partner for negotiations. On the other side, there is the «radical camp» of fanatical field commanders and terrorists such as Shamil Bassayev and Emir Al Chattab, Islamic ideologists such as Movladi Udugov or Zenlimkhan Yanderbayev and criminal warlords such as Arbi Barayev, who was killed in 2001.

Moscow's opponents in Chechnya, then, form a split «rebel camp» from which, along with the autonomously acting warlords, three main groups stand out:

- The group around Maschadov, the so-called Chechen government in exile, ideologically based on a rather secular comprehension of national independence, even though Maschadov fell back on Islamic attributes for the self-assertion of the «Chechen Republic» during

his term in office from 1997 to 1999 (introduction of Sharia courts, etc.). In Moscow, he is only considered one of many warlords in the second Chechen war, not as the most powerful of them.

- ▶ The radical Islamic fundamentalist (Wahhabi) camp, comprising the field commanders Bassayev and Chattab, is the most active group, and receives funding and other support from radical Islamic organisations abroad, but which is widely considered an alien body by the local population. The main fundamentalist-oriented figures include Zenlimkhan Yanderbayev, the first successor to Dudayev in the office of President, and Movladi Udugov, head of propaganda in the first Chechen war, and interim foreign minister under Maschadov.
- ▶ An ideologically neutral group around Ruslan Gelayev split from Maschadov in summer 2000, and retreated to Georgia. Gelayev's fighters stand at the centre of Russian concerns about bases to which Chechen rebels withdraw in the neighbouring country.

There are two different possible explanations for Maschadov's co-operation with his former enemies: after the long and fruitless demands that Moscow accept him as a negotiating partner, he saw no further possibility of reaching a political solution to the conflict, and devoted himself wholly to the struggle, especially since he saw that international politics had let Chechnya down after 11th September; or he wanted to force the other side into negotiations through increasing the military pressure.

The Russian Government now also blames Maschadov for the hostage drama in Moscow. There is allegedly a video recording in which he announces a turnaround in the Chechen war just a few days before the attack, which Moscow interprets as meaning the terrorist action. In a television interview, Movsar Barayev, the commander of the hostage-takers, named Bassayev as the architect of the campaign meant to force Moscow to enter nego-

tiations. Maschadov himself condemned the act of terrorism. But his speaker pointed out that such events could repeat themselves if Moscow did not agree to negotiations or put an end to the military campaign. The co-operation of the «Chechen secessionist government» in the act of terror has neither been excluded nor proved.

### **The Illusion: «Normalisation» and «Chechenisation»**

Since 2001, President Putin promoted the idea of transferring control of the police and administration to the Chechens, in order to gain greater acceptability amongst the local population. The military in the North Caucasus and Kremlin speakers have long heralded the end of the war and a transition to a civilian administration as a precondition for the peaceful reintegration of the breakaway republic into the Russian Federation. At a press conference in Moscow on 24th June 2002, President Putin held out the prospect of an end to the «mopping-up campaigns» carried out by Russian military units in Chechnya, and of strengthening the «justice and security components of the Chechen administration». «Then, we will move to the next step in the normalisation – we will proceed to the adoption of a constitution». In order to underpin the «normalisation», Chechen refugees in the neighbouring regions were pressurised to return to their homes – especially the approximately 150,000 refugees in Ingushia. These, however, saw that not even the most basic conditions for their return to Chechnya had been fulfilled. The war has destroyed up to 80 percent of housing. 80 percent of those able to work in Grozny are without work and means. The city has neither a water supply nor electricity. Above all, though, a rigid series of «mopping-up campaigns» of Chechen settlements by Russian forces continued to exert a murderous pressure on the civilian population, even during the «normalisation phase».

The intensification of the conflict rebutted all claims regarding ending the military campaign and a successful transition to «normalisation» and «Chechenisation» over the last months: battles between the Russian military and the rebels increased, attacks were carried out against the «Chechenised» authorities and administrative bodies, and «mopping-up campaigns» occurred at ever shorter intervals.

### **«Campaign against terrorists», or war of extermination against a country?**

Even if – following the Russian guideline – one were to generally classify the armed forces on the Chechen side as «terrorists», the actions of the Russian army against them would still be *the* classic example for how «war on terrorism» should not look. Precisely because the fight against terrorism has become a global challenge, world opinion cannot allow this action to be sold under this name. In Moscow, comparisons were made between the military measures against the armed forces in Chechnya and anti-terror measures in Spain and Northern Ireland: Sergei Karaganov of the Moscow Institute of Europe said in the *Washington Post* on 29th July 2001: «The nation states of the EU have situations that are similar to Chechnya, for example in Northern Ireland or the Basque region.» Already the choice of weaponry and the number of civilian casualties make this line of argumentation absurd: the measures in Chechnya more closely resemble a massive military offensive against an external enemy than a limited action in an internal conflict. In the first Chechen war, the number of dead amongst the civilian population stood between 35,000 and a much higher figure (up to 100,000); in the second, the order of magnitude is comparable. In order to envisage the severity of the war one has to consider the spatial dimensions of the war zone. The military campaign is concentrated in an area of the small republic, which is only

160 km long and 80 km wide, namely in the most densely populated areas around Grozny and the lowlands. The mountainous third of the country in the south, and the steppes along the Terek in the north are mostly free of military action. Around 80 000 men of the combined Federal troops were concentrated in an area spanning approximately 60 km times 30 km. The rebels continue to resist this concentration because they obviously have the support of a considerable section of the population, even though their hate for some of the rebel warlords of the «resistance» is no less than for the Russian forces. The resistance mostly feeds on the brutal war strategies on the Russian side. According to the Russian military specialist, Felgenhauer, the struggle against the Russian troops does not make the rebels «terrorists», as defined by the Geneva Convention. The atrocities these troops constantly commit in Chechnya are the main reason for the continued resistance, says Felgenhauer.

In 1999, NATO's war in Kosovo served as the model for Moscow's renewed military operation, which was supposed to avoid the disastrous military blunders of the first war. The Russian leadership wanted a «low casualty engagement» with regard to its own soldiers, and the swift and thorough defeat of the opposing side. Putin's «anti-terror campaign», initially planned as a «*blitzkrieg*», included arms and services from which carefully targeted violence was not to be expected, and degenerated into a war of extermination. With the alleged end of the massive military intervention, the time of the «mopping-up campaigns» began, which were even more devastating for the settlements than the bombardments. This label conceals massive terrorisation of the civilian population. After September 11th 2001, the «mopping-up campaigns» of Chechen settlements suspected of maintaining contacts with the rebels occurred in even quicker succession. There are settlements that have been «purged» dozens of times consecutively, and there are hardly any from where young men have not «dis-

appeared». The director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights spoke of a systematic decimation of the male population.

There have been attempts to civilise the Russian military operations. In spring 2002, for example, order No. 80 was issued, according to which soldiers should identify themselves, and draw up lists of those arrested during the implementation of the «mopping-up campaigns». Local officials from Kadyrov's Chechen administration, who repeatedly complained about the high-handedness of the military, were supposed to be allowed to accompany and observe the military operations. However, the order was never implemented. Masked soldiers continued to carry out the «mopping-up campaigns». President Putin took measures to limit the scope of the military's power, and to increase it for the Chechen administration under Kadyrov. But the distribution of power between military and civilian authorities in Chechnya remained confused. The most recent regulation, a decree from 8th October 2002, boils down to increased military rule, not a strengthening of the civilian sector.

The actions of the Russian troops not only encourage arbitrary retribution for the many fallen comrades (by now, the «low casualty engagement» has cost almost as many lives as the war in Afghanistan), but also has features of a predatory attack. The Russian Caucasus Army became a *conflict entrepreneur*. In Russia, the question arose as to whether, amongst the military and political personnel dealing with Chechnya, some forces may have gained a material interest in the continuation of the war.

Of course, there are also entrepreneurs dealing in violence on the other side too. A real «kidnapping industry» had already developed in the period between the wars – as a main aspect of the criminalisation of economic activity and escalation of violence in Chechnya. And after the second Chechen war had begun, Russian soldiers also became the victims of atrocities.

## **Economic aspects of the war in the Caucasus**

Besides the *domino theory*, according to which releasing Chechnya into independence would inevitably have a copycat effect amongst other states of the Federation, and induce the break-up of the Russian Federation, the idea that Russia is defending a part of the country that is essential from the economic point of view is another of the stereotypical, mostly flawed explanations for the conflict in Chechnya. Is the region not a historic location for oil production and processing, and an important transit area? So is it just a «war for oil» – in the geostrategic context of a «great game» going on in the Caspian region?

As a crude oil production area (less than 1 percent of Russian oil production even before the war began), Chechnya is just as dispensable as it is avoidable as a transit area. However, oil does play a role in the conflict – in the sense of a «civil war economy». The production, processing and export structures, now «privatised» by Chechen warlords, have become the main basis for illegal trading that ignores the fronts of the conflict. In spring 2001 the director of the Chechen administration touched on a taboo topic when he spoke of caravans of petrol that were able to pass 20 Russian control-points unchecked. Other criminal transactions, such as the trade in human beings and weapons, pass through the fronts. Weapons and ammunition for the rebels are mainly procured on the black market in Russia, from the manufacturers and from military units stationed in Chechnya. A Chechnya expert in Russia, Sanobar Shermatova, says: «The scale of these illegal transactions extends far beyond the economy, and has far-reaching political consequences. Illegal business relations that link the Russian military with Chechen fighters completely transform the situation in Chechnya. Russian military personnel are showing an interest in the continuation of the war.»

The «mopping-up campaigns» of the Chechen settlements are often organised as kidnappings, through which Russian military personnel improve their pay. Chechen men are arrested and their families blackmailed. But profits are also made from reconstruction programmes for the economy and the infrastructure. In March 2002 President Putin admitted that the confusing structure of the civilian administration in Chechnya, and the Federal offices responsible for Chechnya generate corruption: »The funds flow to Chechnya and move through labyrinthine channels». In 2001, aid totalling 166 m Euro was meant to flow from the Federal coffers into Chechnya. The reconstruction of hospitals and other medical centres stood at the top of the list of priorities. Observers from outside and officials acting within Chechnya discovered «renovations à la Potemkin», aid deliveries that had vanished and fake invoices – all in all a huge potential for corruption and embezzlement.

Not least the Islamisation of the resistance ideology became a resource for the rebels. Even though Moscow's allegations of substantial links between the Chechen rebels and Al Qaeda, or of decisive military support from Islamic brigades may be exaggerated, there is no doubt about the existence of financial support for the resistance movement – especially for its Islamic wing – from the Middle-East. Less state bodies than religious foundations, solidarity groups and charities in Saudi Arabia, the Arab Gulf states, Jordan and other countries have gathered millions in donations. Donations also come from the north Caucasian diaspora in the Middle East. Some Russian sources, on the contrary, consider the main source of income for the Chechen resistance to lie in illegal economic activities that Chechens organise with business partners in Russia.

## The negotiation option

Even before the recent turning point in the Chechen conflict, the political will for negotiations was lacking on the Russian side, especially as regards the military. The Russian government held the opinion that the solution to the conflict lies in the «normalisation of the situation in Chechnya, not in negotiations» (according to Prime Minister Kasyanov on the 4th July 2002). The negotiations that brought an end to the first Chechen war (the treaty of Khassavjurt in August 1996), are considered as treason by elements of the Russian elite. Even so, there have been contacts between Moscow and the rebel leaders in the second Chechen war since April 2000. Regional North Caucasian politicians, such as the former Ingushian President Aushev and his North Ossetian colleague Dsasokhov, as well as politicians and delegates of the Federation, proved to be helpful. Most recently, the former chairman of the security council, Ivan Rybkin, risked an attempt and warned in the Kremlin that the «*blitzkrieg* strategy» in the northern Caucasus region would lead nowhere, and began dealing with Maschadov's representative Sakayev in summer 2002. At that time, Maschadov turned to the G-7 states with an appeal. Zbigniew Brzezinski and Alexander Haig proposed a compromise for the resolution of the Russian-Chechen conflict. Next, Ruslan Khasbulatov, himself a Chechen national and a former speaker of the Russian parliament, presented a model for Chechen autonomy. During a meeting in Liechtenstein between Rybkin and Khasbulatov on the Russian side, and Maschadov's chief negotiators on the Chechen side, the «Khasbulatov plan» and the «Brzezinski plan» were merged into one proposal based on extensive self-determination powers for Chechnya in internal and foreign matters, while affirming the integration of the republic within the territory of the Russian Federation. It calls for a special status for Chechnya, with guarantees from the OECD and the Council of Europe, the delegation of

specific functions to the Federal level, and for demilitarisation while maintaining Russian border controls along the southern border of Chechnya. The Liechtenstein discussions were not backed by Moscow. Nevertheless, they were judged to represent one of the clearest indications for the desire for a peaceful solution to the conflict in analyses by regional specialists.

After the terrorist attack in Moscow, the Kremlin turned against any foreign contacts of the «Republic of Ichkeria» more resolutely than ever before. Denmark and the European Union were the first to notice this. On 28th/29th October, the «World Chechen Congress for a peaceful solution to the Russian–Chechen conflict» met in Copenhagen. Originally, it was meant to take place in Istanbul in May 2002, but was cancelled by the Turkish authorities. The main organisers are the Danish assistance committee for Chechnya and the Chechen World Congress (Chechen Diaspora). People who «could play a role in the resolution of the conflict, and in bringing peace to Chechnya» were meant to be invited to the congress, including representatives of the Chechen Diaspora, human rights organisations dealing with Chechnya, delegates of the Russian Duma, the Council of Europe, the UN and Maschadov's representatives. For Moscow, the participation of Sakajew and other Maschadov representatives was an occasion to declare the conference an event supportive of terrorism. This received more than just a caution from Moscow (the Russian side forced the EU summit planned for November 11th to be transferred from the Danish capital to Brussels): Moscow also had Interpol arrest Sakajev at the conference venue. The charges include the accusation of organising illegal armed groups.

### **The mood in Russia after the terrorist attack**

Opinions regarding the Chechen war became polarised amongst the Russian population. Advocates of an escalation of

violence face opponents of the continuation of the war in the Caucasus. In November 1999, 61 percent of those polled voted for military action in an opinion poll by the VCIOM (Russian Centre for Public Opinion and Market Research), only 27 percent demanded a peaceful resolution of the conflict. In July 2000, only 49 percent were for war, and 41 percent for negotiations. The proportion of pacifists grew to 53 percent by summer 2001. After 11th September, the number of people advocating negotiations reduced in comparison to the previous months, but still reached 45 percent. A first VCIOM poll after the hostage drama ended shows the following situation: the majority approve of the government's actions under the crisis situation from 23rd to 26th October (85 percent for Putin's position, 72 percent for the government's actions, and 82 percent for the actions of the secret services). Each second respondent demands an even tougher approach in Chechnya. 46 percent (12 percent more than in the previous month) approve of the continuation of the military campaign, only 16 percent are for a dialogue with the armed factions in Chechnya; 37 percent are convinced that the situation in Chechnya will deteriorate further.

But tensions are increasing in Moscow and Russia. During the hostage drama, right-wing extremist organisations and an «autonomous combat unit for Russian self-defence» heralded retributive attacks against citizens of Chechen background in Moscow. An organisation of the Armenian Diaspora warned its community that anti-Caucasian sentiments amongst the Russian public and the legal authorities do not differentiate between the different Caucasian ethnic groups. All «persons of Caucasian nationality» would have to prepare for reprisals. Armenians, traditionally allied to Russia, are no exceptions.

Before the hostage drama in Moscow, the situation regarding the Chechen conflict was: the Kremlin cannot cope with the conflict, despite (or because of) the massive



repression going on in Chechnya, and it does not have the will to deal with it politically. The negotiation option is now being restricted more than before, especially because the Russian Government blames Maschadov for the Moscow attack. Even before this, the recommendation of negotiations with him was characterised by a dilemma: either the differentiation between the «moderate» Maschadov camp and his «radical» opponents applies, then this camp only represents one resistance group amongst many, and he will not be able to push through the results of the negotiations amongst the rebels. Or it joins its opponents, which would reverse the criterion for differentiation that legitimises it as a partner for negotiations. But however Moscow describes its military opponents in Chechnya – the negotiation option can only be directed at them if the dirty war in the Caucasus is to end.

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